The St. Petersburg Soviet itself had ceased to be the center of attraction for progressive forces of the nation.

THE GREAT ENIGMA

Thinking about the forces that opposed one another in the revolution, we came again and again to the great enigma of Russian life—the peasants.

Many people in America and Europe believe that the peasants in prerevolutionary Russia were a submissive, illiterate mass, half-serf, half-savage. This is how they have been described by Communist propagandists and the official historians of the U.S.S.R. Russia's great literature, from Pushkin to Nekrasov, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, gives a completely different picture, with some tendency to idealize the moral integrity, spirit of unity, common sense, and dignity of hard-working tillers of the soil, the breadwinners and defenders of the nation.

Living conditions in Russian villages were primitive and the people were poor, but this was not the poverty of farmers in India and the Near East or of peons in Latin America. Even a poor peasant usually had a two-room log cottage (*izba*) with a barn, stable, and other outdoor facilities, a horse or two, and a cow. Not all of them could read and write, but rural education was improving and in some regions nearly every village child received four years of schooling. Sanitary conditions and health services were unsatisfactory, but certainly much better than they are in many underdeveloped areas of the world today. The *izbas* were reasonably clean, and city people did not hesitate to spend a night there, if necessary on the floor, or to drink water from the village well or share a peasant's meal.

There was also a tradition of communal life and self-government in the villages. All in all, the Russian muzhik of 1905 had more of a feeling of independence and was, in many respects, more of a citizen of his country than the inhabitants of the Soviet realm are now. Yet the political attitude of the majority of villagers was an enigma to us at that time.

Agrarian unrest was spreading in the Volga region. The peasants in a village would come together and declare that privately owned land, with the livestock, implements, and stores, belonged to those who worked it. If peasants farmed the land—the predominant use of private land in Russia at that time—a delegation was sent to the landowners. Those who agreed to sign deeds transferring their land to the community were permitted to stay in their mansions; those who did not were ordered to leave. If they disobeyed, their man-